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Introduction

I suggest in this essay that colonialism and racism penetrate the intellectual foundations of security studies at a level deeper than recent discussion would have us believe. This is because of unstated or disavowed ontological assumptions that shape the parameters of the field and lead scholars to foreclose upon a deeper understanding of systemic, racialized relations of violence. The problem in much critical scholarship on security, I will argue, is not only a failure to grasp the centrality of structural racism to the practices and interventions under examination. It is a more insidious matter of what knowledges, experiences and struggles are invisible, and – as a result – what practices and interventions are *not* subject to examination because of the centrality given to security. Even when security is understood in the broadest sense, it is still practices that are about threat and danger, friendship and enmity, that catch the eye of the critical scholar. The result is a tendency to naturalize the denigration and abandonment of non-white and poor populations deemed lacking in the qualities for success within a profoundly violent global political economy.

After staking out my critique – and why I think recent discussion of racism in security studies only scratches the surface of the problem – I will consider how research agendas and methods might be recalibrated with a greater sensitivity towards colonialism and race. Crucially, I caution against attempts to ‘decolonize security studies’ by seeking to add the insights of decolonial and critical race scholarship to the field (see Adamson, 2020) without attention to the ontological assumptions that make it natural to centre security. Taking inspiration from Lewis Gordon (2011) and Olivia Rutazibwa (2020), as well as from my own engagement with decolonial social movements, I propose that part of what is required is greater attention to lived thought, to how reality always exceeds the questions our scholarly communities lead us to ask, and to what is revealed when we consider security through the lens of struggle.

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Why speech-act theory is not at the heart of the problem

In a much-discussed recent article, Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit (2020) excavate the roots of racism in Copenhagen School securitization theory. Securitization theory, Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2020: 17) argue, invokes a taken-for-granted backdrop of ‘normal politics’, whose violences are occluded because of racist intellectual assumptions that are ‘baked into securitization theory’s conceptual apparatus’. Howell and Richter-Montpetit provide compelling examples of civilizationist assumptions in core Copenhagen School texts, whereby less ‘developed’ civilizations are presented as a problem for the more advanced (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020: 7–11). They also show convincingly how anti-black racism, which treats Africa as ‘the ultimate counterpart to not just *Western* but *human* development’, provides a foil for the contrast between securitization and ‘normal politics’ (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020: 14–16, emphasis added). For Howell and Richter-Montpetit, none of this is incidental. Rather, they seek to show that classical securitization theory explicitly mobilizes John Austin’s speech-act theory as a method designed to protect ‘normal politics’. It is, as such, not only methodologically white (failing to recognize how the racial structuring of the world shapes its own terms of reference), but also normatively white (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020: 11–13). While Howell and Richter-Montpetit note that it is beyond the scope of their article to assess whether these same intellectual assumptions pervade subsequent work on securitization and are attendant upon the word ‘securitization’ itself, they cast doubt upon the possibility of reworking securitization theory away from its racist conceptual apparatus (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020: 16–17).

Howell and Richter-Montpetit’s (2020: 4) important analysis leaves little room for doubt that ‘colonial and racist assumptions about racial and civilizational difference animate the core political categories’ of the texts they assess. I am less convinced, however, by the wider implications that Howell and Richter-Montpetit derive from this. My concern is that they risk *underestimating* the subtler ways in which colonial frames of knowledge pervade the field of security studies.

For all the civilizationism, normative whiteness and anti-black racism that Howell and Richter-Montpetit highlight, the heart of securitization theory is Austin’s account of the speech act. I am not convinced that there is anything ‘intuitive’ (Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020: 11) about a conservative deployment of Austin so as to protect ‘normal politics’. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* was a contribution to the philosophy of language, written as a challenge to a positivist tradition obsessed with the truth-value of propositional assertions (Austin, 1962: 1–11). It would not, I think, be difficult to offer an account of securitization through certain performance utterances that was, nevertheless, part of a broader critique of the systemic violence of ‘normal politics’, within an explicitly anti-colonial and anti-racist frame. Let me offer an example.

Between 2006 and 2008, I worked in Colombia as part of a network of peasant, indigenous, trade union and human rights groups with a plural but strongly decolonial ethos of anti-capitalist struggle. The network had been established in the mid-1990s, at a juncture when massacres and selective killings by state-backed paramilitaries were spiralling in the context of plunder of territories and resources by multinational corporations. It was formed, in part, so that organizations from across Colombia could better coordinate their activities. These included an ‘observatory’ to monitor the involvement of multinational corporations in abuses, alongside numerous place-based struggles over land dispossession and labour conditions. The network also incorporated grassroots leftist groups from European countries on a principle of ‘horizontal relations between peoples’. The aim was to build solidarities that could bypass the coloniality of international development and human rights cooperation, not only to protect lives by mobilizing the racial privilege of European ‘accompaniers’ (sometimes referred to as ‘unarmed bodyguards’), but also to draw international attention to the situation without reproducing the epistemic violence of mainstream narratives of

conflict, development and human rights. As I have set out in detail elsewhere (Coleman, 2018: 889–893), these narratives display precisely the sort of civilizationist thinking that Howell and Richter-Montpetit decry. Violence, peace, civil society and human rights are all read ‘against a backdrop of liberal “normalcy”. . . . Liberal capitalist democracy remains the end of which history was made’ (Coleman, 2018: 890). Moreover, lest any reader should suggest – as some have in response to Howell and Richter-Montpetit – that such concerns are symptomatic of a ‘woke’ culture of ‘identity politics’, it is no exaggeration to say that people were being killed so that they demanded no more than this vision of normal politics (Coleman, 2018: 893).

These civilizationist narratives were part of a general discursive environment in which both (illegal) killings and devastating (but for the most part legal) corporate plunder were rationalized on the basis of the population’s inadequate levels of civility. This general discursive environment was accompanied by a well-rehearsed narrative according to which leftist organizations were accessories of the guerrilla. Yet I think the idea of the securitizing speech act could still have something to add. From time to time, politicians, senior army officers or state-linked paramilitaries would indicate that a particular organization or particular social movement leaders were military targets because they were a ‘threat to the nation’ (or something similar). Even in the absence of a desecuritized ‘normal politics’, these statements performed what Austin would call an ‘illocutionary act’ – they did something *in* saying something rather than *by* saying something (Austin, 1962: 99). Of course, they also did something *by* saying something – that is, they also performed what Austin (1962: 101, 118, 120) would call a ‘perlocutionary act’: generating fear for those named, as well as a rush to provide protective accompaniment and an increased likelihood of house raids, arrests, death threats and killings. But they did this by virtue of being a particular type of performative utterance, known colloquially as a *señalamiento* (literally, ‘signalling’). What was significant to the illocutionary force of these utterances was not their truth or falsity. It was what was done – *as a matter of convention* (Austin, 1962: 105) – in the very act of signalling that someone was part of the insurgency. The speech act made a particular sort of security problem by naming an individual or organization as a threat.¹

It is important to emphasize a crucial aspect of the *señalamiento* as an act of securitization that sets this particular act of securitization at odds with the account of securitization conceived by the originators of securitization theory. Wæver and Buzan (2020: 391) insist that they do not have a substantive account of ‘normal politics’ that can be opposed to securitized politics because ‘the theory needs a clean concept of securitization as a distinct operation that is contrasted simply to the non-securitized’. The example above does not work along such lines. On the contrary, the conventional nature of the illocutionary act is shaped by a context in which there is *already* widespread criminalization or securitization of dissent, rationalized through a liberal imaginary of development and civil society. Once we bring the violence of ‘normal’ politics into focus and consider the complex legal and extra-legal ways in which killing is authorized (including in liberal democratic polities such as Colombia), the securitizing speech act starts to look like something much messier than a ‘distinct operation’ to be ‘contrasted simply to the non-securitized’.

Words are not concepts, of course, and what I have presented by means of this example is an account of securitization that is rather different from that which Howell and Richter-Montpetit critique. Still, there is nothing in the word itself that must be linked to ‘a temporal move from normal politics towards the (exceptional) violence of security’ (see Howell and Richter-Montpetit, 2020: 17). The idea of a *señalamiento* as an illocutionary act whose force derives from convention is, I think, useful in understanding how this specific type of utterance operates to create a particular type of security problem, requiring particular protective measures. However, contrary to ideas of a ‘clean’ act of securitization, we are forced to consider the violences of normal politics if we are to understand how that act derives its force. We cannot understand the illocutionary force of the act

without situating it within a broader field of enunciative possibilities shaped within the wider problem-space of the modern/colonial matrix.

The problem of ontological assumptions

I have offered this example not out of a desire to ‘rescue’ securitization theory but en route to identifying a deeper problem that Howell and Richter-Montpetit understate because of their focus on scholarship that puts its racist assumptions on display. If such assumptions are ‘baked into securitization theory’s conceptual apparatus’, this is not because of the use of Austin’s speech-act theory but, as I shall now seek to show, because of the wider conceptual architecture within which speech-act theory is deployed, and – crucially – the ontological assumptions upon which that architecture rests. In order to bring this problem to the fore, I will turn to the rich, empirically grounded, post-structuralist security literature that overcomes some of the problems of a narrow focus on speech acts to consider wider fields of signifying practices.

Much of this post-structuralist scholarship is directly concerned with unmasking the violences sustaining ‘normal’, liberal politics. Yet it is precisely this strength that reveals limitations of the enterprise. As Doerthe Rosenow and I have argued, there is a tendency among Foucauldian security scholars² to foreclose upon a deeper understanding of power and violence because they limit their purview to logics and practices of intervention that are immediately intelligible as being about managing threats, risk, vulnerability, and so on – that is, those practices of interest to a predefined field of security studies (see Coleman and Rosenow, 2016). These logics of security are, accordingly, assessed as if they are representative of what is pernicious about liberal politics in general (Coleman and Rosenow, 2016: 209, 214).

One aspect of the problem is, as Claudia Aradau and Tobias Blanke (2010: 46) note, that political economy is side-stepped. Yet, even when it is acknowledged that, say, protest or migration are responses to structural inequalities with their roots in capitalism, this is set aside from the analysis. Because of how lines are drawn between security practices (those of interest to the discipline) and the (uninterrogated) backdrop against which these take place, security practices are *still*, Rosenow and I sustained, read off a background of ‘normal’ politics that is not called into question (Coleman and Rosenow, 2016). The result is a routine overlooking of more subtle forms of intervention that are key features of the systematic naturalization of capitalism, premised upon disavowal of race and coloniality, and of the ways in which capitalism continues to generate predictable, premature death for large parts of the world’s population. These subtler means of pacification, domestication or normalization – such as the promotion of docile trade unions, orderly forms of protest, ‘civil society’ or corporate ‘due diligence’ for human rights and the environment – are constitutive features of how (neo)liberal governance differentiates between whose humanity is recognized and whose is not. Yet, despite being deeply entwined with those practices recognizable to the discipline in terms of security, they tend to be relegated to the background, treated as benign. Even when this work seeks to go beyond ‘security’ (narrowly conceived), it is still practices that are expressly directed toward managing threat, risk, disruption and vulnerability that are the centre of analysis.

Here we approach the roots of the problem. Both Copenhagen School and Foucauldian studies of security claim simply to be interrogating signifying practices, rather than putting forward their own substantive account of political reality. Yet, as Rosenow and I put it in a subsequent collective discussion,

the object of analysis still tends to be circumscribed by the assumed universality of traditional modern tropes such as survival, threat, and distinctions between friends and enemies. Modern ontologies of what

political reality is 'about' continue to shape what kind of practices catch the attention of the critical scholar (see Ansems de Vries et al., 2017: 91).

The problem, then, cannot be reduced to a failure to grasp the centrality of structural racism to the security practices under examination. This is part of how the problem manifests itself, but it is secondary to the more general problem of what I and others have called the 'tacit reproduction of modern/colonial ontologies in critical thought' (Ansems de Vries et al., 2017).

In international relations more broadly, modern/colonial ontological assumptions are reproduced by an overwhelming focus on Western self-representations as the 'terrain of the political' (Sabaratnam, 2013: 264). Even work that seeks to understand the conditions of possibility and productive effects of those representations has tended to invoke 'a remarkably self-contained and self-referential view of the West' and overlooked a violent history of imperialism as well as much critique of modernity coming from outside the West (Krishna, 1993). There have been sustained efforts over recent years to re-centre colonialism and race in the making of the modern international order, to correct the erasure of non-Western thought from the international relations canon, and to enlarge its understanding of systemic and global dynamics of racialized violence (e.g. Anievas et al., 2015; Carrozza et al., 2017; Grovogui, 2006; Henderson, 2013; Vitalis, 2015). Howell and Richter-Montpetit seek to extend this important work to security studies. However, the question is whether security studies faces *specific* challenges in addressing its colonial intellectual foundations, which *arise from its very self-definition as a field*. Security has long been 'the supreme concept of bourgeois society' (Neocleous, 2008: 11). The epistemic conditions of even the most critical scholarship continue to be shaped not only by the neoliberal academy, with its racialized, class-based and gendered obstacles to admittance, but also by what we look for when we are part of part of a 'we' (see Foucault, 1984: 385), organized around the problematization of security. Disciplines, after all, revolve around the problems that they generate – problems that, in their very framing, imply particular ontological assumptions.

What is remarkable about critical security studies is that scholars – particularly those working in a Foucauldian tradition – acknowledge that the liberal preoccupation with security serves to mask relations of power and violence. They acknowledge that it is not 'all about security', but *still* re-centre security in the very process of calling it into question. The risk is that the (liberal) identification of normality with peace and neutrality is reinforced, that an ideological fantasy is solidified by its constant repetition in practice (Coleman and Rosenow, 2016: 214). Even when liberal accounts of politics are subject to critique, starting from a concern with security (even broadly conceived) can still mean that other relations of violence fade out of view. The world is, in effect, collapsed into a disciplinary perspective (see Gordon, 2011: 99).

A way forward: Thinking through struggle

How might we move past this? It will not do, as Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2020: 17) emphasize, to simply 'add race and colonialism to existing conceptual apparatuses'. However, there are also limits to what can be done by seeking to dismantle those conceptual apparatuses by reference to canonical texts on race and coloniality, without attention to the ontological assumptions that make it seem natural to centre security. We should be wary of any project of 'decolonizing security studies' that seeks to work decolonial insights into the fabric of the discipline in this way (e.g. Adamson, 2020). 'That knowledge has been colonized', Lewis Gordon (2011: 95) reminds us, 'raises the question of whether it was ever free'. Given the acrimony that has animated responses to Howell and Richter-Montpetit, it is worth emphasizing that the epistemic conditions in which all of us work are confined within institutionalized parameters and that the process of inquiry always

means seeking to work past these. 'Any discipline or generated system for the organization of reality faces the problem of having to exceed the scope of its object of inquiry', Gordon writes. 'There is, in other words, always more to and of reality. Failure to appreciate reality sometimes takes the form of recoiling from it. . . . The discipline becomes, in solipsistic fashion, the world' (Gordon, 2011: 98).

This is the challenge for any attempt to undermine the implicit ontological assumptions that focus attention onto particular objects of study, to the exclusion of ways in which humanity is hierarchically ordered and disciplined within extractive-productive relations predicated upon coloniality and racism. Taking that challenge seriously requires not just asking what scholarship on race and coloniality has to say to the discipline, but something more like what Gordon (2011: 99) calls a 'teleological suspension of disciplines' that is itself 'an epistemic decolonial act'. Otherwise, there is a risk that the racial foundations of security are acknowledged, but without being situated within these wider dynamics of extraction and production, coloniality and racism. It is necessary to de-centre security, to address the relations between security and political economy, between self-declared means of managing risk, threat or vulnerability and technologies through which 'normal politics' is produced and contained. While the latter might look benign, they nevertheless serve to discipline humanity (or regulate admission to the category of human) within acceptable parameters for the continuation of capitalist extraction.

I want to return at this point to my example of peasant, indigenous and worker struggles in Colombia. From the perspective of these struggles, it was quite apparent that the security practices of state institutions and multinational companies were entangled with more insidious means of producing and containing 'normal politics'. NGO intervention to promote 'civil society', development and human rights was more clearly a means of 'civilizing society', of fostering forms of political participation compatible with extractivist capitalism, based on the racialization of the population as not fully mature or entirely rational (Coleman, 2018: 892). The killing of those who continue to organize against the extractivist economic model, or who are deemed likely leaders of possible future resistance, becomes visible as the flip side of this (Coleman, 2018: 892–893). So, too, from this perspective, intersections between ordinary legality and the exceptional measures that tend to be of interest to security scholars come into view. In Colombia, as elsewhere, killing with impunity is authorized through a state of exception through which normal law is suspended in the space of necessity (Coleman, 2018: 881–885). Yet, when we think through struggles against extractivism, what is apparent is the extent to which ordinary legality produces political-economic relations that systematically generate premature death with impunity (Coleman, 2018: 885–886). With a different starting point, one that suspends the disciplinary preoccupation with security, 'normal' legality comes to the fore as more than a backdrop for exceptional security measures, demanding 'a perspective that brings the concept of the state of exception to the process of understanding the legal ordering of contemporary capitalism' (Atilés-Osoria and Whyte, 2018: 816).

Thinking through attention to struggles such as these points us to the question of how, as Olivia Rutazibwa (2020: 233) writes, 'centring the experiences of the peoples concerned as a place from which to know the world, denaturalises the way we have studied the world so far; how it makes many of our theories and approaches, disavowed rationales, erasures and silences, untenable and even obscene'. To centre such experiences is by implication to de-centre the core concepts and problems of our disciplines. It makes it necessary to grapple with the conceptual dissonance between terrains of knowledge (disciplinary and lived, scholarly and activist) without recourse to a readymade set of concepts. This is not to say we should replicate those voices and knowledges that are silenced and disavowed (see Spivak, 1988). It is, rather, an invitation to think in dialogue, to listen, to be willing to unlearn. 'To imagine [international relations] anti-colonially', for Rutazibwa (2020: 240), 'requires from those of us at the hegemonic centre a willingness to a

dislocation of power, an openness to (have others) redefine expertise and rigor, and to discomfort in the face of new knowledges.' Discomfort – as Foucault ([1979] 1994) emphasized – can be an impetus to critique, to the redefinition of our terms of reference, to noticing and reassessing the tacit ontological assumptions that are reproduced within disciplinary frames of reference.

One aspect of thinking through struggle, then, is an impetus to unlearn and to de-centre concepts central to our disciplines. A second aspect, however, is that such a perspective should caution us against the idea that it is desirable, or even possible, to interrogate signifying practices in the absence of any ontological assumptions (whether by means of analysis of speech acts or of wider discourses). We need some form of ontological investment if we are to have any sense of what is at stake in these struggles. It matters whether what struggles are up against is a fluidity of contingent power relations, fixed structures, and so on. It matters how humanity and nature are understood. While one lesson that might be derived from our discussion of Foucauldian security studies is that we cannot escape ontological assumptions, it is also not enough to simply acknowledge such assumptions as projections (see Connolly, 1992). If we are to grasp the stakes of struggle, we need some understanding of the 'big picture', of the dynamics of capitalist extraction, of the worlds, lives and knowledges being defended against these dynamics, within the broader problem space of the modern/colonial matrix.

This brings us to a third aspect of thinking through struggle: that it moves us away from static frameworks derived from canonical texts (alongside any temptation to apply the latter to existing disciplinary problematics). Attention to struggle focuses us upon the lived dimension of thought that Gordon emphasizes. It is often within processes of struggle that ontological commitments are transformed, refined or even pluralized. Understandings of power, violence and ethics are deepened through engagement with the world. For instance, the social movements I have discussed here have developed an understanding of diverse facets of the colonality of power as a result of confronting the deadly policies of multinational companies and the state, only to come up against the interventions of international NGOs that served to allocate humanity and politics in terms consistent with those policies. So, too, links of solidarity with struggles elsewhere, alongside dialogue with populations invoking different ontologies and cosmovisions, often generate plural conceptual repertoires within social movements. These shape engagement with the world in different ways and are shaped by that engagement in return. Thinking through struggle means paying attention to this plurality and movement of lived thought as it is developed by intervening in the world and trying to change it. There is a longstanding tradition in social science of treating methods as simply a matter of the correct application of tools after ontological commitments have already been resolved and the concepts are already in place (see Aradau et al., 2015: 2; Gordon, 2011: 99). Thinking through struggle, by contrast, builds on work in critical security studies that approaches methods as 'a way of experimenting with an assemblage of concepts, methods and empirical objects' (Aradau et al., 2015: 7), a mode of bringing concepts, methods and objects together in heterogeneous and sometimes disruptive ways.

Thinking in dialogue and centring struggles and knowledges that are normally suppressed or erased will present itself as a different sort of task depending upon our positionalities and research projects. In my case, this process relied upon prior relationships, the privilege of being able to cross borders, and research funding that made it possible to sustain these relationships and to engage in these struggles. Indeed, I could not now, as a single parent, have developed the close relationships overseas that I currently maintain with the help of network tools. More historically focused empirical work will also require a different sort of listening – perhaps to voices concealed in archives – and an ethnographic sensitivity to struggle when direct participation is impossible. This article does not offer a prescription but a provocation towards a particular sensibility and openness that

might make it possible to suspend the disciplinary preoccupation with security, rather than seeking to ‘decolonize’ security studies without interrogating its implicit ontological assumptions.

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Notes

1. By talking in the past tense, I am not seeking to suggest that these dynamics are not ongoing but reflecting on what was happening while I was living in Colombia.
2. I am not including in this characterization the literature that Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2019) denote Foucauldian security studies, which is to say those scholars who sought to extend and update Foucault’s concept of biopolitics to offer a theory of liberal global rule. While I broadly agree with Howell and Richter-Montpetit’s assessment of the latter, the idea that Foucault provides the basis for a global theory is out of step with Foucault’s historicist and nominalist ethos. The ‘more empirical’ Foucauldian studies that Rosenow and I engage are far more in the spirit of Foucault’s own ethos, offering careful genealogies, tracing the contours of *dispositifs* and assemblages, and asking us to consider the multiple contingent processes or events through which threat and risk are both identified and managed, and thus cannot be subject to the same criticisms that Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2019: 4) make of the ‘biopolitics of liberal war’ thesis.

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